



Seaman handles mooring line on fantail of aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* during regularly scheduled port visit to Singapore, April 2, 2018 (U.S. Navy/Michael Colemanberry)

# Strategic Shaping

## Expanding the Competitive Space

By Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, Matthew D. Strohmeier, and Christopher D. Forrest

*To prevail, we must integrate all elements of America's national power—political, economic, and military. . . . The United States must develop new concepts and capabilities to protect our homeland, advance our prosperity, and preserve peace.*

—2017 NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

*Deterring or defeating long-term strategic competitors is a fundamentally different challenge. . . . [O]perations must introduce unpredictability to adversary decisionmakers. . . . [W]e will challenge competitors by maneuvering them into unfavorable positions, frustrating their efforts, precluding their options while expanding our own, and forcing them to confront conflict under adverse conditions.*

—2018 NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

The strategic imperative to succeed in great power competition demands a new approach to strategy to deter, compete, and win against rising and resurgent powers.<sup>1</sup> Competitors are exploiting gaps between the traditional understanding of “peace” and “war” to aggressively advance their interests below the threshold of armed conflict—often in ways that undermine the U.S.-led international order. Russia encroaches on the sovereignty of its neighbors, such as the Ukraine, while the international community struggles to respond in ways that will deter this behavior in the future.<sup>2</sup> China flouts international law, claiming new territory and others’ intellectual property as their own, while eroding U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

Both the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy recognized this paradigm shift in warfare and now identify China and Russia as strategic competitors who exploit advantages below the threshold of armed conflict to reach their strategic objectives.<sup>4</sup> General Joseph Dunford recently referred to these actions, broadly termed *hybrid warfare*, as “adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict.”<sup>5</sup> The National Defense Strategy puts an even finer point on the challenges that China and Russia pose, stating “they have increased efforts short of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring lines between civil and military goals.”<sup>6</sup> These actors make operational gains with means that fall short of the Western definition of war—and the West fails to provide options to deter or counter these competitors’ further gains.<sup>7</sup>

While U.S. strategic guidance calls for a new approach to these challenges,

military planning and strategy still reflect previous ideas of deterrence and coercion. Current paradigms rely on the direct threat or application of military force—posturing force against force in the field to compel an opponent to back down.<sup>8</sup> In a similar way, these paradigms often view shaping operations prior to conflict as a means to set the battlespace for tactical and operational success in military conflict. The result of this strategy is often a military campaign that lacks strategic vision beyond the tactical fight and an operational battle of attrition where the larger or better equipped force prevails. This approach served the United States well over the past century while it enjoyed a dominant global military advantage. In the decades since Operation *Desert Storm*, however, the Nation has increasingly relied on technological dominance, ceding quantitative military superiority to these competitors. This strategy has proved effective against countries and nonstate actors over which the United States still retains an asymmetric military advantage.

However, such a strategic approach may be ineffective in the face of the rapid military advancements of China and Russia, particularly within their immediate regions.<sup>9</sup> The eroding American advantage demands that the joint force consider additional concepts that move beyond regional attrition-based warfare to exploit competitor weaknesses and apply U.S. global advantages. Moreover, the National Security Strategy specifically calls for new concepts enabling the United States to “deter potential enemies by denial, convincing them that they cannot accomplish objectives through the use of force or other forms of aggression.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the National Defense Strategy compels the joint force to consider approaches that “introduce unpredictability to adversary

decisionmakers” and “challenge competitors by maneuvering them into unfavorable positions, frustrating their efforts, precluding their options while expanding our own, and forcing them to confront conflict under adverse conditions.”<sup>11</sup>

This article argues that to counter these actions and maintain an enduring military and national competitive advantage, the U.S. defense establishment must develop new strategies and operational concepts that expand the competitive space to deter great powers from escalating prior to or during crisis and ensure that we maintain military advantage at an acceptable cost in conflict. To this end, this article presents a new approach termed *Strategic Shaping*. Strategic Shaping is a coercive strategy employing an integrated whole-of-government approach that aims to complicate an adversary’s calculus and target his strategic intentions, not just his forces. The objective is to create a sharp deterrent effect by removing the adversary leadership’s sense of control of the crisis or conflict. There are three pathways through which the United States can strive to impact strategic perceptions:

- by rapidly presenting the adversary with multiple dilemmas, degrading adversary leadership’s sense of control
- by enhancing the complexity of the situation, instilling doubt in the adversary leadership’s mind of their own capabilities
- by posturing to react globally instead of locally, leveraging U.S. strengths against adversary weakness.

Strategic Shaping contributes to the current debates on how to manage in great power competition by providing a new approach for countering countries’ attempts to make operational gains on the margins of “peace.” It is also more than horizontal escalation; it is a paradigm shift from a force-on-force approach to one that first seeks to create deviations in an adversary’s expectations. Lastly, the concept of Strategic Shaping builds on classic research in the areas of coercion and deterrence that highlight

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the untapped asymmetric advantages that exist in first exploiting adversary perceptions and desired strategic outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Rather than advocate for a new theory of deterrence or warfighting, this article offers a tangible way to put the advice of these thinkers into practice to address today's great-power challenges. In the words of Air Force Chief of Staff David Goldfein, the joint force, as part of a whole-of-government approach, must transition from "wars of attrition to wars of cognition."<sup>13</sup> To achieve this approach, military strategists must rethink how military force is employed in crisis and conflict, while recognizing the de facto blurring of those lines by our strategic competitors.

While the theory behind Strategic Shaping certainly applies to steady-state strategy for great-power competition, the scope of this work is primarily within the crisis and conflict space. This article first examines leading coercive theories, highlighting their applicability to dealing with rising power challenges in the Gray Zone between peacetime and wartime. We then posit the need to evolve from a focus on attrition and material factors to one of perception and cognitive factors. Finally, we outline the how and what of Strategic Shaping as it might be applied in a whole-of-government approach against a strategic competitor.

### Moving from Attrition to Cognition

Coercion is the threat of damage in order to convince a state to yield or comply with one's demands or desires. Both deterrence and compellence are forms of coercion; deterrence is the deployment of military power so as to be able to prevent an adversary from doing something that one does not want him to do, while compellence is the deployment of military power so as to be able either to stop an adversary from doing something that he has already undertaken or to get him to do something that he has not yet begun.<sup>14</sup>

The success of either form of coercion relies on the capability to inflict unacceptable costs, communication of the threat, and the credibility of the threat. To date,

the defense establishment has relied heavily on material capabilities, use, and demonstrations of military superiority to meet these three standards in crisis and the ability to attrite fielded forces in conflict. But direct application of force on force may be insufficient to successfully coerce more advanced countries such as Russia or China. Instead, we argue that strategy must focus on using military forces in such a way that impacts a potential adversary's beliefs about the costs, benefits, and likely outcomes of different courses of action.<sup>15</sup> In other words, instead of threatening or attempting to destroy an adversary's fielded forces as much as possible, Strategic Shaping directly targets adversary incentive structures and decisionmaking. Only through affecting cognitive change can U.S. attempts at deterrence and compellence short of war against a near-peer competitor be successful. Additionally, like any coercive strategy, Strategic Shaping is fundamentally a political-diplomatic strategy that is most effective in producing a deterrent effect on the adversary in crisis or early conflict when integrated and synchronized across the whole of government.<sup>16</sup>

The *raison d'être* of the military is to apply force against an opposing military to produce a desired military and political endstate, but if coercion is fundamentally psychological in nature and is most effective when integrated across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements, how does the military best present forces to achieve coercive effects when it is not *at war*?

Such a planning shift may require the U.S. defense establishment to adjust its paradigms on the effective use of military force. Traditionally, Western powers held to the Clausewitzian model that war is violence and without violent actions, a nation is not really at war. This simple paradigm shackles the military to a myopic search for the war it wants to fight rather than the one its competitors might present. Moreover, in this paradigm, there are mutually agreed-upon rules for both peacetime, such as the rules, norms, and principles of the international order, and those in wartime, such as the Geneva

Conventions. But China and Russia often take actions designed to undermine the United States and its allies without escalating to the threshold of armed conflict. Any nation shackled to a binary understanding of wartime and peacetime is necessarily vulnerable to adversary exploitation and unnecessarily cedes valuable competitive space. Understanding an adversary's intentions and war paradigm allows for the development of a counter strategy, one that often must include competition below the threshold of conflict. This is the void into which Strategic Shaping takes the first of many steps to come.

### A Complementary Approach

Strategic Shaping is a coercive strategy that applies rapid, whole-of-government strategic actions to present multiple, complex dilemmas to an adversary's leadership and thereby removes their sense of control, deterring them from military conflict. Where pure cost imposition and denial strategies attempt to influence adversary operational capabilities by destroying or dislocating fielded forces, Strategic Shaping directly targets an adversary's strategy to rapidly confound his ability to control the boundaries of a crisis and instill doubt in the efficacy of continued military action. The intent is to reduce the adversary's confidence in his strategy, to create the sense that he has overreached, and to turn his focus to political objectives that now appear to be at risk. By exacerbating uncertainty, Strategic Shaping strives to deter the use of force in crisis and compel an off-ramp in conflict. But if forced to fight, Strategic Shaping also postures forces globally to fight from a position of advantage. Strategic Shaping targets adversary strategic intentions, applying U.S. strengths to confound those intentions for a deterrent effect.

There are three central elements of a Strategic Shaping approach. First, there is the creation of rapid, simultaneous dilemmas that applies during the crisis space before an adversary selects a military course of action to achieve his aims. Specifically, the United States needs to consider how its adversary expects the





SA-330J Puma helicopter drops supplies on flight deck of USS *Truxtun* during vertical replenishment with Military Sealift Command dry cargo and ammunition ship USNS *Richard E. Byrd*, Red Sea, April 12, 2014 (U.S. Navy/Scott Barnes)

crisis to unfold, and in particular how the Nation will respond, and then take actions that confound these expectations. For example, in evaluating a military option, adversary political leadership often seeks assurances from the military that lower level provocations will not result in a crisis or conflict that may put other strategic political goals at risk. If, during a growing crisis, the United States executes concise whole-of-government actions targeted against varied vulnerabilities beyond the immediate issue—to include geopolitical weaknesses, internal political rivalries, national infrastructure challenges, economic dependencies, and geographic limitations—this may cause the adversary to reassess the risks of its approach. Faced with a significant deviation between expectations and reality, doubt and risk aversion increase, sense of control and confidence decreases—all delaying or even preventing the adversary from continuing along his planned course.

The second element of Strategic Shaping encompasses the movement and posturing of forces to positions that can hold at risk adversary weaknesses with the U.S. strength of global power projection. The movement of these forces, while effectively setting the theater with required posture, also multiplies the first element's effects of multiple dilemmas. As the Departments of State and Commerce take coordinated actions with the adversary's bordering nations, the movement of naval and air forces to posture against adversary weaknesses creates additive dilemmas. These challenges increase if American forces can stage in third-party nations, elevating the political cost of in-conflict targeting decisions and thereby their go-to-war calculus. These actions exacerbate the cognitive sense of loss of control and confounded expectations. Most importantly, if the adversary chooses conflict, these globally postured forces allow the United States to respond

with multidomain military force from a position of advantage against adversary weaknesses.

The third element of Strategic Shaping is the display of asymmetric military capability to instill doubt in the success of the use of force in the minds of adversary political leadership and applies in late crisis and into conflict. Rather than reducing the adversary leadership's sense of control of the situation, this element seeks to erode their assumptions of military capability and the effectiveness of their forces against the United States. In combination with the previous elements, the Nation would rapidly demonstrate previously undisclosed asymmetric military capabilities. While this comes at a long-term tactical cost of allowing the adversary to develop a response, the short-term political benefit of instilling military doubt and compelling an off-ramp may outweigh the cost. The more that demonstrations



F/A-18F Super Hornet, assigned to Fighting Redcocks of Strike Fighter Attack Squadron (VFA) 22, breaks sound barrier over aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* during airpower demonstration, Pacific Ocean, May 3, 2018 (U.S. Navy/Spencer Roberts)

of capability mask the actual technology or platform, the greater the doubt created in the minds of the political leadership. As the interwar strategist J.M. Speight stated of cognitive effects of new technology, “the mystery of airpower is half its power.”<sup>17</sup>

The linchpin of these three elements are speed and synchronization.<sup>18</sup> Taken alone, the movement of military forces during a crisis to an unexpected or threatening location may not create a significant deterrent effect. In fact, such an isolated action may have the opposite result by signaling a lack of real U.S. resolve, appear as an unsupportable overextension, or be used by an adversary as a pretext for war. However, the same movement of forces, if combined with a host of whole-of-government actions and synchronized with U.S. resolve, may compel adversary leadership to select a nonmilitary approach. Such actions may

include a variety of nonkinetic diplomatic, informational, military, and economic pressure across varied geographic locations. Because speed and synchronization are vital to create the cognitive effect of these actions, a Strategic Shaping approach must be thoroughly planned and precoordinated at the highest levels of government.

Central to this coordinated response is the need for implied reassurance to the adversary that if he ceases the coercive military action, the United States will remove all corresponding pressure. This reassurance may come as direct messaging to the adversary leadership or through the careful choice of actions that can be quickly reversed and that can minimize lasting political impact, providing the adversary with off-ramps that minimize international and domestic fallout. In this way, the coercive effect is achieved.

## Conclusion and Implications

One of the enduring challenges of any strategist or military planner is to understand and correctly assess the operational and strategic environments. A military planner must also understand the characteristics and centers of gravity of the adversary and select the appropriate strategy to meet desired friendly force strategic endstates. There are times, as history has shown, where strict cost imposition and attrition-based strategies are appropriate. This article does not discount their usefulness. Instead, we argue for shifting our coercive strategy paradigms from attrition toward cognition—starting with adversary beliefs and perceptions and then considering operational capabilities. From the perspective of today’s antiaccess/area-denial operational environment and great-power use of Gray Zone warfare, competitive overmatch must start from an asymmetric perspective, applying strengths to weaknesses. The wars of tomorrow need to operate within the cognitive domain and with the kinetic and nonkinetic capabilities that can be brought to bear to directly influence adversary choice selection. Strategic Shaping and the concepts discussed herein have the ability to produce the complex dilemmas for an adversary to create significant effect on its sense of control and therefore its decision to use force. Strategic Shaping, at its core, seeks to achieve Sun Tzu’s elusive maxim to subdue one’s enemy without fighting, and it postures the joint force from a position of strength if it comes to conflict.

We must now evolve our strategy to attend first to adversary intentions and ability to make coherent decisions through an asymmetric approach that pits U.S. strategic strengths against adversary weaknesses. Strategic Shaping directly answers the call from the National Defense Strategy that demands we “develop new operational concepts to sharpen our competitive advantages” and “expand the competitive space, seizing the initiative to challenge our competitors where we possess advantages and they lack strength.”<sup>19</sup>

The requirements to consider a Strategic Shaping approach holds several implications for the joint force. Operational planning and strategy must move beyond current paradigms and institutional processes to maintain relevance in a time of great-power competition. Such efforts must consider first the cognitive domain of warfare and integrate whole-of-government actions to produce nonkinetic effects that shock an adversary's strategic expectations. These effects rely greatly on timing and tempo to maximize the deterrent effect. This rapidity of action would require a pre-coordinated Strategic Shaping plan at the level of the National Security Council to effectively integrate the arms of government and to allow for rapid approval and implementation in crisis.

John Boyd once quipped that neither terrain nor machines fight wars (humans are the ones who fight) and that battles are won by influencing the minds of humans. By focusing on how to best influence adversary perceptions and expectations, a Strategic Shaping approach is better equipped to deter adversary coercion and prevent escalation by instilling adversary doubt in the effectiveness of a military course of action. JFQ

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Authors' Note: In this article, Strategic Shaping is introduced at the conceptual level in order to illustrate how to apply new and innovative ideas in an era of great-power competition. Pacific Air Forces has applied the Strategic Shaping strategy to the Pacific theater, and the resulting concept of operations is available at higher classification levels should the reader desire more information on this subject.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It appears as though great-power warfare is not only increasingly possible but also *plausible*: "The main reason why great-power warfare has become somewhat more plausible than at any time since the height of the Cold War is that both Russia and China are dissatisfied powers determined to change the terms of a Western-devised, American-policed international order, which they believe does not serve their legitimate interests." See "The Future of War," *The Economist*, January 27, 2018, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 8: "The clearest recent cases of grey-zone challenges are Russia's intervention

in the Ukraine and China's assertive behavior in the South and East China Seas." Furthermore, Russia's objective in the Ukraine is not to "win a war" but to bring it further into its orbit and to discourage other countries from doing the same. Finally, a RAND 2015 study points to the very real challenge posed by a Russian attack against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in which the Alliance would be unable to successfully defend its most vulnerable members.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10. The best example here is "China's grey-zone campaign to assert uncontested control over the South China Sea and jurisdiction over disputed islands." In doing so, many suggest that China "has been able to cow most of its neighbors into a sullen acquiescence while avoiding direct confrontation with American naval ships."

<sup>4</sup> See *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 2–3. This point is also echoed in the National Defense Strategy, which states, "China and Russia are now undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and 'rules of the road.'" See *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Clark, "CJCS Dunford Calls for Strategic Shifts; 'At Peace or at War Is Insufficient,'" *Breaking Defense*, September 21, 2016, available at <<https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/cjcs-dunford-calls-for-strategic-shifts-at-peace-or-at-war-is-insufficient/>>.

<sup>6</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> "The Future of War," 10.

<sup>8</sup> Standard operational planning models as described in Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 16, 2017)—and practiced throughout the combatant commands—emphasize in the design phase that "commanders and planners can design campaigns and operations that focus on defeating either *adversary's forces*, functions, or a combination of both." See JP 5-0, IV-39. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> See Mark Gunziger and Bryan Clark, *Winning the Salvo Competition: Rebalancing America's Air and Missile Defenses* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), 1, i: "Since the end of the Cold War, the Pentagon had the luxury of assuming that air and missile attacks on its bases and forces would either not occur or would be within the capacity of the limited defenses it has fielded. These assumptions are no longer valid. . . . Despite DOD's urgency, these investments have fallen short of creating defensive architectures with sufficient capacity to counter large salvos of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and other precision-guided munitions."

<sup>10</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 26–29.

<sup>11</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> While we did not include an extensive literature review in the article, the primary works of Thomas C. Schelling, Lawrence Freedman, and Alexander George were referenced heavily.

<sup>13</sup> Megan Friedl, "Goldfein Delivers Air Force Update," *AF.mil*, September 19, 2017, available at <[www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1316603/goldfein-delivers-air-force-update/](http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1316603/goldfein-delivers-air-force-update/)>.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Alexander George writes, "coercive diplomacy and deterrence are political and psychological strategies that must be directed by political leaders, coordinated with diplomacy, and sensitive to adversary's political constraints, world views and perceptions." Quoted in Jack S. Levy, "Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy: The Contributions of Alexander George," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 4 (August 2008), 538.

<sup>16</sup> Just as integration across diplomatic, informational, military, economic powers, and whole-of-government coordination is a pillar of Strategic Shaping, it is also a recognized requirement for just the type of strategic competition called for by the National Defense Strategy, which states that "effectively expanding the competitive space requires combined actions with the U.S. interagency to employ all dimensions of national power" in a seamless and integrated fashion. See *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 4–5.

<sup>17</sup> Len Deighton and Max Hastings, *Battle of Britain* (London: Michael Joseph, 1990), 15.

<sup>18</sup> The focus of speed, maneuver, and resiliency of these forces is also wholly consistent with the guidance in the newly released National Defense Strategy, guiding the joint force to "prioritize ground, air, sea, and space forces that can deploy, survive, operate, maneuver, and regenerate in all domains while under attack. Transitioning from large, centralized, unhardened infrastructure to smaller, dispersed, resilient, adaptive basing that include active and passive defenses will also be prioritized." See *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–7.